Chapter IX

Principal Superintendents

JAMES HOBAN was born in Dublin, Ireland, about the year 1762. He was educated in Dublin and won the medal in his art studies from the Society of Arts in 1781. Not long after this period he came to the United States and settled in Charleston, S. C., where he quickly secured commissions as an architect, erecting the old statehouse at Columbia, S. C. This building, which was highly commended as an artistic production, has been destroyed by fire. He also designed a number of private structures in Charleston.

When the Government offered a premium for the best design for a Capitol and Executive Mansion, Hoban entered the competition. There is nothing in the record to show that he made plans for the Capitol; he apparently confined his efforts to the design for a President's palace. This competition was closed July 15, 1792, and Hoban's plan was selected immediately and without hesitation, after a view of the drawings which were submitted. They being similar in character to those illustrated in this book, which were sent in for the Capitol, there could have been no doubt as to the wisdom of the selection. He was highly recommended by Laurens and others from South Carolina.

Hoban's design contemplated a central building with wings. His original drawings of this building are not to be found; therefore his treatment of the building as a whole is open to conjecture. The central portion of the building was executed from his designs and under his supervision both before and after the damage to the building perpetrated by the British in 1814. The north portico was not completed until about 1829, but it was executed under Hoban's direction. Hoban, as has been stated before in this work, was placed in charge of the Capitol as principal superintendent when Thornton declined this position, and according to a letter of Jefferson he had the title of surveyor or superintendent of public buildings from 1797 to 1803. Although he held this position, he seems to have confined his labors as architect or designer to the Executive Mansion. As far as I can discover, he did not design any other building after obtaining the President's House, either for the Government or private individuals. His work in connection with the Capitol has already been described in other portions of this history.

From the time he came to the city, in 1792, until his death, in 1832. Hoban was almost continuously employed in superintending work for the Government, such work extending to roadways and bridges as well as buildings. He apparently had no ambition for architectural designing other than that shown in the Executive Mansion. He was a man of even temper and on friendly terms with all the Architects and superintendents with whom he came in contact. Having dealings with Thornton, Hallet, Hadfield, and Latrobe, he never seemed to have at any time but the most pleasant relations with them. He was a good draftsman and a refined designer as well as a most successful superintendent, and his services were in demand until the time of his death.[1]

STEPHEN HALLET was born in France and educated in Paris. He established himself in Philadelphia, Howard, in a magazine article, says, before the Revolution, but I can not find any confirmation of this

[1] Brown's principal source for his sketch of Hoban came from James Hoban, *Eulogy Pronounced, March 6, 1806* (Washington: J. E. Norris, 1846). For major modern works discussing Hoban's architecture in Washington, see William Seale, *The President's House,* 2 vols. (Washington: White House Historical Association in cooperation with the National Geographic Society, 1986) and *The White House: The History of an Idea* (Washington: American Institute of Architects, 1992).

statement. At the time of the competition for the Capitol he had acquired considerable local reputation. Hallet, as shown by the records, left no traces of his designs behind him, although he labored zealously to induce the authorities to modify Thornton's designs and adopt in their place some of his own unsatisfactory efforts.[2] I can find no trace of other work which he performed or notice of him after his connection with the Capitol ceased, in 1794. He always occupied a position subordinate to Thornton and Hoban.[3]

GEORGE HADFIELD was born in England and educated in London. He received at the British Royal Academy of Art the first prize for excellence in architecture. This entitled him to four years' travel and study. Benjamin West, when he was president of the Royal Academy, thought that Hadfield possessed a knowledge of the theory of civil architecture superior to any young man in England at that time. When Hallet was discharged, John Trumbull, being in England, urged Thornton to appoint Hadfield superintendent of the Capitol, praising both his capacity and temperament highly. Hadfield was a man of no experience in superintendence when he took charge of this branch of work on the Capitol, as was proved by the results. He was a draftsman of considerable ability and a good and refined designer, having left work which is still standing in this city to prove his capacity in this line. He designed the old executive offices which were removed to make way for the present buildings of the Treasury and State, War, and Navy Departments. He designed the old city hall in Washington, which is standing to-day and used by the courts of the District of Columbia, a building of dignity and refinement. He also designed a tomb for the Van Ness family, which was built in the burial grounds of David Burns, the father-in-law of Van Ness. This tomb was removed to Oak Hill Cemetery and is now one of the most satisfactory mortuary structures in the cemetery. It is modeled from the Temple of Vesta. When his work on the Capitol terminated, in 1798, he remained in Washington, making plans for the other Government work mentioned, as well as conducting a private business. He died in 1826 and was buried in the Congressional Cemetery.[4]

JOHN LENTHAL [Plate 134] was born in England in 1762. He was a great-great-grandson of Sir John Lenthal, the fourth of the name, who was a member of Parliament, and whose father, Sir William Lenthal, was speaker of the House of Commons. Latrobe selected Lenthal as superintendent when he took charge of the work in 1803. He was called clerk of works and principal surveyor. A letter of Latrobe gives an idea of the duties which the clerk of works was expected to perform. He was to represent the Architect during his absence, act as judge on all materials and workmanship, employ and discharge men, and make detail drawings under the direction of the Architect. An arch on the staircase hall, constructed according to Latrobe's directions, fell in the month of September, 1808, and Lenthal was killed by the falling brick. Latrobe thought most highly of his ability and capacity, only a short time before his death telling him in a letter: "I gave you the office from no motive whatever but a conviction that in skill and integrity I should not find your superior—a conviction which experience has since verified."

Davis was the clerk of works who succeeded Lenthal. I have found no data in relation to him, but he does not appear to have proved satisfactory, as he was replaced on the Capitol by Peter Lenox because of what the commissioner of public buildings considered inefficient

[2] Many of Hallet's drawings of the Capitol are held by the Library of Congress. See Pamela Scott, "Stephen Hallet's Designs for the United States Capitol," *Winterthur Portfolio* 27 (Summer/Autumn 1992): 145–170.

[3] Brown's source for his discussion of Hallet was James Q. Howard, "The Architects of the American Capitol," *International Review* 1 (November–December, 1874): 736–753.

[4] Ibid. For a more recent biographical sketch, see George Hunsberger, "The Architectural Career of George Hadfield," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 51–52 (1951–52): 46–65.

conduct of the work. This change of clerks of the work was also the cause of Latrobe resigning his position.

PETER LENOX [Plate 135] was born in Williamsburg, Va., March, 1771. His ancestor on the Lenox side came from Scotland to the United States early in 1700 and settled in Williamsburg. His father, Walter Lenox, married a Miss Carter, of that town. Walter Lenox, who was a man of means in that section of Virginia, lost a large part of his property during the Revolution, and his son, Peter Lenox, came to Washington in 1792 to seek his fortune. He was made a foreman on the Executive Mansion and then clerk of works. This position he held before the building was partially destroyed by the British and during its reconstruction after the fire. In 1817 he was transferred to the Capitol and held this position until the work was completed, in 1829. He was commissioned a captain in the war of 1812. The duties of Lenox were similar to those performed by Lenthal. It appears from the record that parties in these positions were not required to give their entire time to the Government, as Lenox conducted an extensive lumber business and amassed for that day quite a fortune. Comparatively early in his career, in the early part of 1800, he had built and lived in a large four-story residence (which is still standing), on Maryland avenue, near the river, with its grounds extending to the river. This house is considered a handsome structure at the present day. He invested in real estate and became one of the active and prominent men of the Federal City, frequently serving in the city council before his death, in December, 1832. He was highly respected by all in the community.[5]

GEORGE BLAGDEN [Plate 133], who was superintendent of stonework and quarries, came to this country some time before 1794, at which date he was employed on the Capitol, and continued as superintendent until he was killed by the caving in of an embankment at the Capitol June 4, 1826. The commissioner at the time of this accident wrote to Bulfinch, who was in Boston: "We have met with an irreparable loss. Mr. Blagden was killed last evening at the falling of the bank at the south angle of the Capitol." Blagden was a man in whom all who were connected with the work—Thornton, Latrobe, Bulfinch, and the several commissioners—had the most implicit confidence, and on whom they frequently called for advice. He was also a thrifty man and accumulated a moderate fortune.[6]

ROBERT MILLS [Plate 136], when he was appointed architect of Government buildings by Andrew Jackson, in 1836, assumed the duties of superintendent of repairs and additions to the Capitol. He added nothing to the design or plan of the building, but performed many services in connection with repairs and alterations to add to the comfort of Congress, which are mentioned in previous pages of this history. He served in this capacity from 1836 to 1851.

Mills was born in the city of Charleston, S. C., August 12, 1781. He was the son of William Mills, of Dundee, Scotland, who came to Charleston in 1772. His mother was Anne Taylor, a great-granddaughter of Thomas Smith, who held the title of landgrave from the British

[5] Peter Lenox was Brown's maternal grandfather; Brown's information probably came from his grandmother, who Brown recalled "had many stories to tell about Hoban, Latrobe and Bulfinch, with whom she was acquainted with as a girl." Lenox's papers were destroyed in a fire sometime before 1850. See Glenn Brown, *Memories, 1860–1930: A Winning Crusade to Revive George Washington's Vision of a Capital City* (Washington: W. F. Roberts, 1931), 38 and 103; see also C. T. Coote, *Discourse Delivered at the Second Presbyterian Church, December 27, 1832, on the Death of Peter Lenox* (Washington: anon., 1883).

[6] Brown's information on Blagden came from a letter concerning the death of Blagden and progress on the work on the Capitol. See Joseph Elgar to the President, December 7, 1826, in *Public Buildings: Message of the President of the United States, Transmitting the Annual Statement of the Commissioner of the Public Buildings, of the Expenditure on the Same, and the Progress of the Said Buildings* (Washington: Printed by Gales and Seaton, 1826), 5–6. See also Curator's Files, AOC.

Crown, being one of five Carolinians to hold this title. Smith was also governor of Carolina from 1690 to 1694. Robert Mills died at his home on Capitol Hill, in Washington, March 3, 1855.

Mills studied first with Hoban and then with Latrobe, working as a draftsman for the latter on the Capitol. His practice was extensive. In Pennsylvania he designed the fireproof wings of Independence Hall, Philadelphia, the capitol at Harrisburg, and the single-arch bridge over the Schuylkill.[7] At a later date he designed several United States custom-houses and marine hospitals. In Virginia he designed the Monumental Church, and worked for Thomas Jefferson on his dwelling at Monticello. Letters in the possession of his family show that it was at least a cooperation with Jefferson that produced the effective work at the University of Virginia. He was architect for the well-known Washington monument in Richmond, Va. Another Washington monument in Baltimore, Md., a Doric column, simple and impressive, the custom-houses in New London and Middletown, Conn., New Bedford and Newburyport, Mass., and the marine hospitals in New Orleans and Charleston are also of his design.

While State engineer in South Carolina he constructed the Charleston and Hamburg Railroad, one of the first works of the kind projected and carried into execution.

After his appointment in 1836, as architect of public buildings in Washington he remained in this city until his death, in 1855, and in his position until 1851, designing while in this position the E Street front of the old Post-Office building, the F street front of the Patent Office, and the Fifteenth street front or long colonnade of the Treasury building, as well as making a design for the Washington Monument which was adopted by the association and which contemplated a shaft 600 feet high. This was to have been surrounded at the base by a pantheon in which it was contemplated to place statues to the illustrious dead. Of course, it is well known that this portion of the design was never executed and that the shaft as completed was not carried up to the contemplated height.

Mills, in the work which he executed, showed great ability as a designer, always producing simple and dignified buildings, with well-proportioned masses and refined details, in which he always followed the best classical examples, preferring Greek to Roman models. His buildings for the Government were vaulted in brick and of the best fireproof construction, with the exception of the roofs. He showed a high order of ability, both in design and construction.[8]

[7] Mills's design for the Pennsylvania capitol complex in Harrisburg was not erected. See John M. Bryan, ed., *Robert Mills, Architect* (Washington: American Institute of Architects, 1989).

[8] For early biographical works on Mills's career, see Helen Mar Pierce Gallagher, *Robert Mills, Architect of the Washington Monument, 1781–1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935) and Gallagher, "Robert Mills, 1781–1855: America's First Native American Architect," *Architectural Record* 65 (1929): 387–393.

PLATE 133

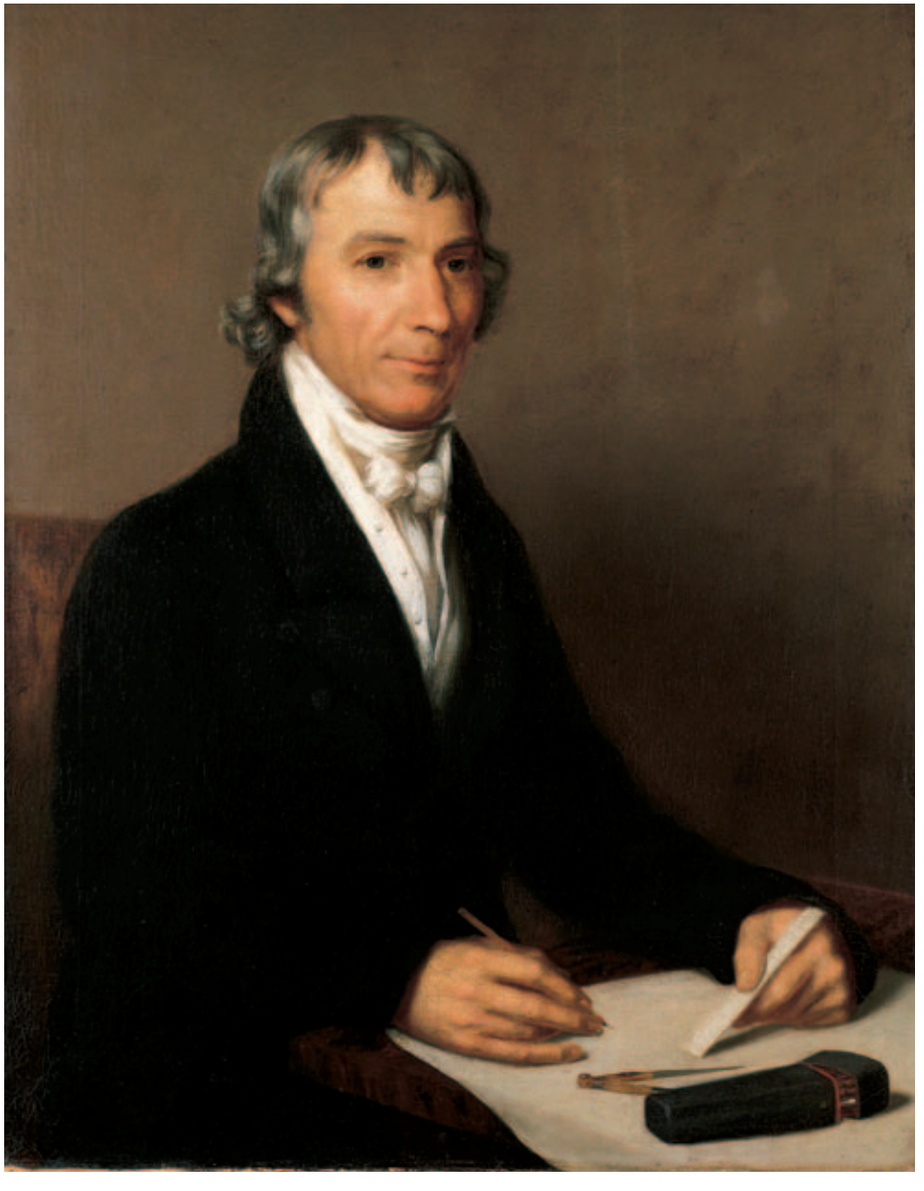
GEO. BLAGDEN, SUPERINTENDENT.

Plaster bas-relief. *Location unknown.*

PLATE 134

JOHN LENTHAL, SUPERINTENDENT.

Bas-relief detail from Lenthall's monument at Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, D.C. Brown misspelled Lenthall's name.



PETER LENOX, SUPERINTENDENT.

Charles Bird King, oil on canvas, ca. 1820. Lenox was Glenn Brown's maternal grandfather. *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.*

ROBERT MILLS ARCHITECT.

This drawing was executed by Glenn Madison Brown, ca. 1900. *Location unknown.*